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SUBJECT: NEW DEMOGRAPHIC REPORT FUELS DISENGAGEMENT DEBATE

Classified By: Ambassador Daniel C. Kurtzer; Reasons: 1.4 (B) and (D).

11. (C) Summary and Comment: A recent study claiming that the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza is overestimated by up to 1.5 million people has made headlines in Israel and provided ammunition to opponents of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's disengagement plan. The new numbers, however, did little to sway the Prime Minister or his supporters, who have often cited the Palestinian "demographic threat" to the Jewish majority as a main reason for disengagement. By maintaining control over what will become a majority Arab population between the Mediterranean and Jordan River, proponents of disengagement have argued, Israel would lose its character as a Jewish, democratic state. Regardless of whether this argument -- or the population figures contained in the new report -- are valid, PM Sharon remains determined to move ahead with his disengagement plan. End Summary and Comment.

Lies, Damn Lies, and Statistics

12. (U) Israeli demographers, led by Professors Sergio Della Pergola in Jerusalem and Professor Arnon Sofer in Haifa, first warned of a "demographic threat" in the late 1990s, after analyzing data released by the Palestinians Central Bureau of Statistics in 1997. Although the details vary depending on the model used, these initial studies predicted high growth rates for the Palestinian population. Della Pergola's model predicts that the Jewish population in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza will be a minority by 2010. Sofer maintains that even without the Territories, the proportion of Israel's population that is Jewish will decrease (from over 80 percent today to 64 percent in 2020).

13. (U) In January 2005 the American Research Initiative (ARI) issued a new study claiming that the "demographic threat" is exaggerated. ARI's report said that the generally accepted figures for the combined Palestinian (3.83 million) and Israeli Arab (1.3 million) population living in Israel, the West Bank, and Gaza are inflated by as many as 1.5 million people. ARI's assessment is based upon registered births and deaths from the Palestinian Ministry of Health, immigration and emigration data from the Israeli Border Police, as well as statistics from the Israeli Ministry of Interior, the Civil Administration for the West Bank and Gaza (COGAT), and the Palestinian Central Elections Commission. Using these statistics, ARI maintains that previously predicted Palestinian growth rates of 4-5 percent are unrealistically high. ARI also claims that the PA's 1997 baseline improperly double-counted Arabs living in Jerusalem and included many non-resident holders of PA identity cards.

14. (U) ARI concludes that the Palestinian population has remained stable at approximately 25 percent of the total population between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, where Jewish and Jewish-affiliated groups (e.g., Russian immigrants not considered Jewish under religious law) comprise a 60 percent majority. According to ARI's findings, Jewish residents currently outnumber Arabs by a total of four-to-one inside Israel (including Jerusalem but not Gaza or most of the West Bank). Upon releasing the report, ARI said that the challenge facing the GOI is one of dealing with a large Arab minority in Israel; not one of dealing with an eventual Arab majority.

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Is Israel's Status as a Jewish State in Danger?
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15. (U) For the demographers, the debate is a dispute over the actual size and growth rate of the Palestinian (and Israeli Arab) populations in relation to Israel's Jewish community. Della Pergola, among others, claims that fertility rates used by ARI are "unrealistically low;" while the birth rate among Palestinians is falling, Della Pergola notes that families in the West Bank still have an average of 5.4 children, while those in Gaza have 7.4.

16. (C) Behind the academic facades, however, are conflicting socio-political agendas. Although the U.S. businessman who financed the ARI report denied to poloff that he has any political agenda, he is known to support settler groups and is the founder of the "American Friends of the Golan." Sofer

recently sent a letter to PM Ariel Sharon urging him to physically separate Israel from the Palestinians or face "the end of the Jewish state of Israel."

17. (C) For the politicians, the statistics are important because they cut to the core of Israel's unique status as a Jewish and democratic state. In the past few years, politicians from almost every sector of the political spectrum have used the data to argue both for and against policies such as accelerated negotiations with the Palestinians, construction of the fence, and disengagement. On the left, the Labor Party has long maintained that the rapid increase in the Palestinian population is cause for urgency in concluding a broad agreement with the PA. Vice PM Shimon Peres once told reporters that "the demographic clock is not ticking in Israel's favor."

18. (C) Opponents to disengagement have used demographics (including the new ARI study) to counter such arguments. After hearing a presentation of the report, the Chairman of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, Yuval Steinitz, told reporters that the research suggests that Israel can afford to remain in Gaza and the West Bank for a longer period of time until a political solution is reached. Finance Minister Binyamin Netanyahu caused an uproar last year when he claimed the only "demographic bomb" threatening Israel came from Israeli Arabs. His Ministry later announced that a decrease in the birthrate among Israeli Arabs had been the result of cutbacks in child welfare allowances.

19. (C) PM Sharon has not been swayed by the IRA statistics. The day after the report was released, Sharon publicly downplayed the numbers, saying he sees "no reason to worry about that." In the past, he has used demographic data indirectly to support his disengagement plan, maintaining that withdrawal from overwhelmingly Palestinian areas will safeguard Israel's character as a Jewish, democratic state. Deputy Prime Minister Ehud Olmert has made similar arguments, raising the specter that Palestinians will oppose a two-state solution if they believe they will eventually comprise a majority of the population. "I shudder to think that liberal Jewish organizations that shouldered the burden of the struggle against apartheid in South Africa will lead the struggle against us," he said when asked about possible Jewish rule over a majority Arab population.

10. (C) Comment: In the end, the "demographic threat" is only one of Sharon's justifications for the disengagement plan. Even if further debate validates the new population figures in the ARA report, Sharon has other -- and more important -- strategic, economic, and political factors that will keep him on the path to disengagement. More disturbing is that the politically explosive issue of demographics is now in play again and that the contradictory conclusions will be used by each side to advance its political aims, despite disputed facts.

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